

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



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**Workplace Innovation in Canada. Reflections on the Past Prospects for the Future**, by Jacquie Mansell, A Study prepared for the Economic Council of Canada, Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1987, pp. ix + 40, ISBN 0-660-12554-4

Since the 1970s there is a growing interest in Canada to promote the workplace innovation based on the sociotechnical premises. This is not only the impact of foreign patterns, mainly the Swedish example which has become popular in Canada much beyond the leftist academic circles.

In order to improve the climate of industrial relations, as well as the productivity, Canadian managers and organizational consultants have intensified their interest in the job redesign, joint committees, parallel structures, gains-sharing programmes, and socio-technical systems (even if the latter are difficult to implement).

Of course, this does not mean that the employers and the trade union leaders both are ready to redesign completely the primary work system as well as the support systems. In many cases actually the basic structures are left untouched and the public relations image remains much different from the shopfloor reality. On the other hand, the new technological contingencies reinforce the dependence of the organization on its members.

The dependable self-regulation becomes a necessity and the Canadian manufacturing in its bid for survival has to search for the sociotechnical solutions. The management of several Canadian businesses «believe that the sophisticated, highly computer-integrated manufacturing systems of their plants require a committed, multi-skilled, flexible, and self-regulating work force» (p. 19).

There are several conditions of a successful innovation: a clear and continuous support from the top, original design adequate to the local needs, a wholistic approach, recognition of human relations, the on-going process of change, acknowledgement of the larger context, recognition of various local interests, redefinition of management's prerogatives, relaxation of the rigid contractual rules (minimal critical specification and maximum flexibility as an ideal). According to J. Mansell, «Union opposition has been one of the main reasons why many organizations have engaged in only very limited forms of innovation, if any, and why many more substantial innovations have died despite significant positive results» (p. 23). There is an obvious necessity to integrate new work forms and collective bargaining at various levels of organization. At least some Canadian trade unions show goodwill to reconcile the quality of working life principles with the collective bargaining procedures.

The search for a consensus at the management-trade union-government level is of a crucial importance for the QWL perspective. Mutual trust is not only the question of interest reconciliation but also the problem of necessary skills and an adequate situational diagnosis. There is a need to promote training in management sensitivity and human relations available not only to managers but also to the trade union functionaries. The skill in shaping the satisfactory mutual relations is one of primary conditions of the QWL success. Teamwork is an art not easy to master as long as the involved individuals do not know how to handle successfully various group situations.

Another aspect worth to be considered is the moral and humanistic background of the QWL projects. In order to make corrections to the existing work situations it is necessary to have an adequate model of human rights and needs. For example, in FRG R. Löffle and, W. Sofsky have recently presented such a model (*Macht, Arbeit und Humanität*, Göttingen: Jürgen Croom, 1986), using it to study the pathology of work situations. It would be worth to promote the same reasoning applicable to the Canadian scene.

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